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ABSTRACT

The small amount of funding provided by the federal government for research on the higher education system and the reasons for this research to be given such a low priority are discussed. A rationale for doing research on higher education and for federal funding of such research is proposed, followed by specific recommendations for documenting the need for research on higher education and processes for conducting the needed research. (SPG)

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Federal Policy on
Higher Education Research

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If higher education hopes to survive the fierce competition for resources that lies ahead, it must learn what other industries have learned: namely, that progress in any human system depends on a research base which produces information leading to better practices. Unfortunately, this message has gone unheeded for decades, and the condition of research on the higher education process is weak, fragmented, and grossly inadequate. In fact, research on higher education is so limited that it scarcely exists as a visible national process. The only well recognized exceptions at the present time are NCHEMS in the area of management and the ACE/UCLA freshman survey, which do have national focus. Typically, academic institutions have, at best, established small offices of "institutional research," which usually include a research person and a part-time secretary supported by a tiny budget. The chief function of such an office is usually to collect data on students, faculty, finances, and course offerings on a year-to-year basis. Another time-consuming function of these overworked units is that of responding to government questionnaires. The focus is on the immediate survival of the institution, and little attention is given to long-range planning or to longitudinal research.

At the national level, leadership on higher education research in the past has come from the major foundations, such as the Carnegie Commission with its comprehensive ten-year survey of the system, plus the special

programs of the Ford, Rockefeller, Sloan, Lilly, and Kellogg Foundations. However, as their portfolios have declined, the foundations have grown less forthcoming in their support. National private organizations, such as the Educational Testing Service, the College Entrance Examination Boards, American College Testing Program, and others conduct research on problems which fit their special missions, and they are more likely to be seekers of research support rather than providers of it.

Institutions lack the profit margin that enables industry to make the kind of investment in R&D that is needed to enhance product viability. Indeed, in times of institutional budget crunch, the research office and the library are often the first to feel the pinch. Institutions simply lack the wherewithal to perform an adequate research function.

In terms of public support for higher education research, only in rare instances do state governments show an interest, and they are ~~not~~ likely to support specialized concerns responsive to political pressures (e.g., N.Y. State funded research on the costs of educating disadvantaged).

The federal R&D effort in behalf of higher education is concentrated in the Education Division of DHEW. The National Institute of Education performs the R&D function, and its small budget is heavily concentrated on elementary, secondary, and vocational education. Other DHEW activities--not classified as R&D--include the demonstration projects of FIPSE and the data-gathering processes of NCES. Federal research priorities have generally ignored higher education, and except for the Congressionally mandated study of postsecondary education finance (1972 Amendments) (1973-74), the federal government has not addressed higher education as an area of research interest.

As an industry, higher education employs 1.9 million people and spends \$50 billion annually on operating costs; but only an estimated \$75 million goes into R&D on the higher education system. This amounts to .15 percent. By comparison, medicine spends 22 percent of its industrial resources on R&D, and agriculture invests 14 percent. Bell Telephone is one private industry that devotes \$750 million to R&D, a figure about ten times larger than the amount spent for higher education R&D.

Since the federal government is the only major instrument capable of providing the R&D resources needed for higher education, we turn attention to the total federal effort on R&D for all fields. The federal government is by far the leading supporter of R&D activities in the nonprofit sector of the national economy. Competition for inclusion in the federal R&D budget is a prime function of all federal agencies, and it is worth looking at the results to identify the winners and losers.

Within the \$500 billion total of the federal budget, R&D authority for FY 1979 amounts to \$29.2 billion, an increase from \$27.4 billion in FY 1978. Major components of the R&D authority are: defense, \$13.8 billion; space, \$3.4 billion; civilian R&D, \$10.7 billion; and facilities, \$1.3 billion. By character of work performed, R&D authority includes \$3.6 billion in basic research, \$6.6 billion in applied research, and \$17.6 billion in development. Of all R&D work performed (which totals \$27.9 billion) \$3.6 billion of the total will be performed in colleges and universities. DHEW as a federal department accounts for \$3.3 billion of the federal R&D budget and of this sum \$128 million is for education R&D: \$100 million for NIE, \$27 million for USOE, and \$1 million for the Assistant Secretary for Education. Unfortunately, the breakdowns of the education component by categories are not

available, for the very good reason that it is too miniscule to divide. But inquiry of NIE suggests that about 22 percent (or \$22M in 1979) of their budget goes to "postsecondary education," which covers a host of projects aimed at basic skills, equity, finance, and dissemination. NIE's current reorganization and budget plans promise to give more opportunity for higher education initiatives.

In terms of the proportions of the federal effort that goes for research and development, one finds the following relationships for FY 1979:

R&D as percent of total federal budget 5.7%

Percent of Federal R&D budget by field:

Defense	43.8%
Energy	14.5%
Space	14.4%
Health	10.2%
Science	2.8%
Agriculture	2.1%
Education	0.4%
Higher Education	0.08%

(Source: OMB Data for Special Analysis P, FY 1979 budget)

Now let's look at probable explanations for the federal government's low level of funding activity. There would seem to be about three reasons, working in combination. The first is the historical relationship between the federal government and the higher education institutions. In a nutshell, public higher education has been the responsibility of the individual states, since education is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. And the

responsibility for nonpublic higher education has been assumed by various organizations--often religious--and individuals in the private sector. One other aspect of this historical relationship is the federal government's long-standing habit of purchasing services from the universities based on national priorities. For example, the federal government has been sponsoring research in agriculture for over 100 years. More recently, the government has been heavily funding research in the sciences through the National Science Foundation, and through the National Institutes of Health. In purchasing services in these and other areas, the government has not been concerned with the system that delivers the services, but only with the services themselves.

A second probable explanation relates to the lack of pressure on the federal government for funding research on the higher education system itself. The Higher Education Act and its various amendments provide for categorical assistance in such areas as facilities, libraries, new and developing institutions, and student financial aid, but nowhere in the legislation is there any title regarding research. Although NIE was created by the Education Amendments of 1972, from the outset, it has focused primarily on the elementary and secondary levels. FIPSE, originally proposed as a foundation, was reduced by the Congress to a fund, and the higher education community made no concerted effort to rescue it. Both NIE and FIPSE have encountered Congressional resistance to their appropriation requests. No strong constituency exists to support education research programs before the Congress and the Administration in marked contrast to the powerful constituencies that exist for research in health, science, and agriculture.

Part of the lack of major federal program legislation for research-- and of pressure for such legislation--probably stems from the general view of research, held by the institutions themselves. By and large, the institutions have viewed research as a desirable scholarly activity in broadening and refining knowledge in given disciplines and in applying this knowledge to solving various problems in society. But they have failed to view research as a means for increasing knowledge about their students, improving the services delivered to these students, and improving the management and deployment of resources.

Another part of this lack of pressure for research has been the higher education community's general attitude of "hands off" when it comes to the federal government. Watchful of their academic freedom, institutions have typically regarded the federal government as a potential--if not actual--intruder into ^{their} affairs. The requirements that go along with federal grant funds--such as affirmative action, safety and health standards, heavy reporting demands, and monitoring--have made these funds seem like a mixed blessing at best. In short, too many strings are attached to the bucks. Both these factors--the institutional view of research and ambivalence toward the federal government--have undoubtedly contributed to the lack of a strong higher education coalition to go after research funding on a large scale for their common concerns. As the third explanation here, the federal government has tended to view higher education as an optional choice on the part of individuals and a competitive market among the institutions in terms of how many and what kinds of individuals choose higher education. Student financial aid has been aimed at (1) giving low-income people an

opportunity for higher education that they probably would not have had without the federal assistance or (2) rewarding veterans for their military service. In funding the student through such programs as BEOG, GSL, and GI benefits rather than funding the institutions directly, the federal government is pursuing a national policy of equalizing opportunity for individuals. In general, the effects of the student aid have been to increase the number of customers for higher education and to maintain the competitive market. But in equalizing opportunity in education, the federal government has not provided the funds either to study the new customers or to assist higher education institutions in serving them.

In earlier sections, it was pointed out that funding for research on the higher education system is ridiculously small and that research is at the bottom of the totem pole of priorities from the federal standpoint for several reasons. Now we want to propose a rationale for doing research on higher education and for federal funding of such research. Here are the key points:

1. In terms of national policy, the federal government should be interested in funding this kind of research, since equalizing opportunity is a major public policy. The extent to which the nation is making progress toward providing equality of access and choice in higher education needs to be systematically examined.
2. New consumers, such as older adults and low-income "first-generation" college students, have been coming into higher education with differing needs, expectations, and levels of preparation. As these new consumers increase, the traditional consumers--students

typically between 18 and 22 years of age from middle-class backgrounds-- decline proportionally. How well is the higher education community really serving the newcomers? How much is known about them? The disheartening article, "How to Kill a College," by Theodore L. Gross, which appeared in the February 4, 1978, Saturday Review, suggests that it is not doing so well. If these newcomers are to become permanent consumers, then higher education should get to know them better so that it can plan and implement the services that they will need--and want.

3. Competition for employment opportunities will become fierce in the 1980's and beyond, as the number of college graduates and postbaccalaureate degree-holders comes to exceed the number of jobs available. Higher education should be doing research not only on the effectiveness of its programs in relation to employment opportunities but also on the effectiveness of its advisement of students with respect to programs and its placement assistance for graduates at various degree levels. Federally funded research in these areas would seem to be essential if major unemployment problems are to be avoided.
4. Higher education has always provided trained manpower for government and industry. Through research, the higher education system could (a) become increasingly more responsive to the needs of government and industry for specific types of qualified people, (b) update and modify program offerings in accordance with these needs, and (c) thereby enhance the employment opportunities of

graduates by providing specifically trained manpower for identified needs of government and industry.

5. The progress that higher education institutions are making in achieving their affirmative action plans is another area for research. That is, research should be carried out to determine the best ways of achieving affirmative action, to document the progress being made, and to assess the impact of affirmative action on programming, budgeting, faculty, and students. Since affirmative action is a legal responsibility of the federal government, federal assistance should be made available to the institutions in their efforts to achieve it.
6. With the costs of higher education steadily rising, institutions must find increasingly effective and efficient ways for serving and retaining students until the completion of their programs. For example, high student attrition rates and low student enrollments in certain programs are costly drains on limited institutional resources. Through research into these and other problems facing the higher education system, improved strategies for serving and retaining students can be evolved.
7. Finally, the higher education community must have research information that assesses and documents the quality of its graduates. Growing criticisms of graduates' unpreparedness, grade inflation, "diploma mills," and high attrition rates pose a real threat to higher education's credibility.

Thus far, this paper has dealt with the nation's position in terms of public policy for research on higher education. Knowing where we are is

essential to going where we would like to be. Evolving a viable strategy for performing national research on higher education involves both the documentation of need for that research and the development of structures and processes for conducting the needed research.

In the absence of some major innovation by a foundation to undertake the task (such as that of the Carnegie Corporation in the 1960's), the instrument at hand for documenting research needs is the federal government. A systematic assessment of research needs is a logical assignment to NIE-- or to some commission that could report to NIE. While that possibility exists, there is no evidence that it is about to happen. NIE needs to develop organizational and budgetary strength as a precursor to systematic appraisal of research priorities across the spectrum of education. Nevertheless, the convening of knowledgeable people to develop a research agenda for higher education is an objective that should be pursued by the federal government under some responsible aegis.

Recent proposals by President Carter--combined with Congressional bills and Senate hearings to create a Department of Education--provide fresh hope that education R&D will find new sponsorship. One of the glaring weaknesses of a new department structure will be the absence of a respectable research base on educational practice as now found within the Education Division of DHEW. In creating a Department of Energy in 1977, Congress also decided to formulate a major R&D program in the new department; it could do the same for a new Department of Education. Testimony to this effect should be given to the Congress.

Another approach that should be followed is that of collaboration among the members of the higher education research community to develop an agenda

of research needs. As a start in this direction, the major education associations have recently formed a Coalition of Postsecondary Education Research Interest, which has prepared a report on research needs and priorities in ten subject areas of higher education. This coalition needs financial support and organizational strength to perform a useful function in assessing national needs and strategies--free from governmental control.

Another component of documentation is that of merging the research problems of secondary education with those of postsecondary education in order to achieve articulation between the levels. The learning problems of college students have their beginnings in the high schools. Improved procedures for developing student motivation and decision making in favor of higher education must be carried out during secondary school years--at least for the traditional students of higher education. In order to accomplish these procedures, processes for multilevel research on the education system must be developed.

Still another component of strategy is to seek linkages with other research interests in the major fields, including science, health, agriculture, and energy. Indeed, these fields now include research projects of direct relevance to higher education, and the opportunity for collaboration with researchers in these fields should be pursued by public and private organizations sponsoring research on higher education.

Finally, the private education sector should take positive action in petitioning Congress to fund existing authorities--and create new ones as needed. For instance, major increases in the funding of FIPSE should be sought; or perhaps, the authorization of FIPSE should be reconceived in a new department of education. Thus far, higher education interest and support

of FIPSE has been lukewarm at best. It is too much to expect the Congress to establish funding priorities when the interest clientele is apathetic.

Federal agencies which already have research missions covering higher education--such as NIE, NSF, and USOE--should be encouraged into undertaking research programs relevant to postsecondary education. The continued promulgation of federal policies affecting higher education should be accompanied by a research program thoughtfully created to assure the implementation of public policies and national goals.